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ABSTRACT

Wisconsin junior and senior high schools enroll approximately 500 children of migrant agricultural workers each year, but performance data shows that in 1982-83 twelfth grade service to migrant students was only 17% of the first grade figure. Problems which contribute to the high dropout rate of junior and senior migrant students in Wisconsin include lack of opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities, low attendance, limited English proficiency, lack of parental involvement, lack of home environment conducive to study, feelings of insecurity, responsibilities for sibling care, teenage pregnancies, early marriage, limited vocational guidance and academic counseling, and lack of coordination of class schedules, course content, textbooks, and recordkeeping between Wisconsin and homebase schools. A map of the major migrant streams is appended. (LFL)

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THE EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGES OF JUNIOR HIGH AND HIGH SCHOOL MIGRANT STUDENTS IN WISCONSIN

PART ONE OF A SUPPLEMENTARY SECONDARY SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR THE CHILDREN OF MIGRATORY AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN WISCONSIN

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In the spring, thousands of children of American migratory farmworkers leave home with their families as they enter the migrant streams. Students leave school before the second semester is completed knowing they will not return until late in the fall, long after school has started. For these children there is no thrill of showing off report cards on the last day of school or of proudly announcing promotions to the next grade to family and neighborhood friends. Often the students leave without knowing whether credit will be granted for the work they have completed, unsure whether they will have to repeat a course, or if they will be promoted from one grade to the next. For junior high and high school students there is no signing of year books, no swapping of class pictures, and all too often, no graduation. Available evidence suggests that fewer than one in four students in the United States who enter the agricultural migrant stream will receive a high school diploma; some predictions are as low as one in ten.[1] That ratio of one out of four students remaining in school until graduation contrasts sharply with the national figures of one out of four students who fail to graduate that caused America to refer to itself as a nation at risk.[2] According to the national data gathered by the Migrant

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[1]Exotech Systems, Inc. Evaluation of the Impact of ESEA Title Programs for Migrant Children of Migrant Agricultural Workers, Vol. 1 (Falls Church, Vigrinia: 1974), pp. 2-3.

[2]National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" (Washington D.C.: 1984), p. 6.

Student Record Transfer System for the 1980-81 school year, the number of eligible migrant students who were enrolled in instructional programs at the first grade level was approximately twice that of the students enrolled at the ninth grade. Less than one fourth of the first grade figure, according to the computer data, were served in grade twelve.[3] Wisconsin performance data for the 1982-83 school year show that twelfth grade service is seventeen percent of the first grade figure. While the figures are influenced to some extent by economically improved families leaving the migrant stream and by the limited number of school programs being provided at the upper grade levels, the most significant factor contributing to the statistics is the number of migrant students who drop out of school.

Every year more than five hundred educationally disadvantaged junior high and high school age children of migratory agricultural workers attend secondary schools in Wisconsin. These students come from other parts of the United States with their families seeking employment in Wisconsin's agricultural industry. Wisconsin, America's dairyland, placed eighth in the nation in 1984 with the production of agricultural commodities valued at more than five billion dollars.[4] In addition to being a national leader in dairy

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[3]National Association of State Directors of Migrant Education, "Program for Migrant Children's Education: A National Profile" (Olympia, Washington: 1984), p. 17.

[4]Wisconsin Agricultural Reporting Service, "1985 Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics" (Madison, Wisconsin: 1985), p. 1.

and livestock production, Wisconsin ranked twenty-second in vegetable production and food processing which accounted for over one billion dollars in total cash receipts. In 1984, Wisconsin stood first in the nation in the production of green peas, snap beans, beets for canning, and cabbage for sauerkraut; it was second in sweet corn for processing; and third in the processing of lima beans, cucumbers for pickles and tart cherries. In 1983 figures reported by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, expenses for hired labor needed to support dairy, livestock and crop production activities exceeded four hundred million dollars.[5] Included in that four hundred million dollar cost were wages paid to temporary migratory agricultural laborers hired by Wisconsin growers and canners to meet their needs for large numbers of skilled workers during the growing and harvest seasons. Despite a decline from fifteen thousand adult seasonal workers employed in 1955 to four thousand in 1985, Wisconsin continues to rank in the top half of the fifty states in the production of those crops requiring hand labor for cultivation, harvesting, and processing.

Wisconsin's requirement for seasonal labor begins in April and peaks in August, the state's need for labor remains high

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[5]Wisconsin Agricultural Reporting Service, "1985 Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics" (Madison, Wisconsin: 1985), p. 1.

through the month of November and ends in December.[6] It is this need for a temporary labor force working on an agricultural calendar which overlaps the school year calendar that contributes to the educational disadvantages suffered by migrant students. The disadvantage experienced by every migrant student, regardless of classroom performance, is that of an interrupted education.

In the summer of 1984, Wisconsin's junior high school aged migrant students from the school districts of Berlin, Wautoma, and Wild Rose took part in a national study sponsored by the Interstate Migrant Secondary Services Program.[7] The special IMSSP junior high project was developed to learn the reasons students would give for dropping out of or staying in school. It was recognized that even when the act of dropping out occurs in high school, the decision to leave school before graduation is often made in junior high. For purposes of the IMSSP study, educational disadvantages or problems were divided into two categories: those which the students identified as having been created by institutional or school factors, and those that were of a personal nature and influenced by the home. Occasionally, a factor such as language could be found in both groups; the division of educational disadvantages by home and school

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[6]Michael Richards and Doris P. Slesinger, The Migrant Farm Worker Population in Wisconsin, 1981 (Madison, Wisconsin: 1984), p. 3.

[7]Interstate Migrant Secondary Services Program, "Junior High Migrant Student Services: A Compendium" (Oneonta, New York: 1985), p. 3.

factors, however, was helpful to the identification and understanding of the specific needs of migrant students in secondary schools. One of the most frequent school attractions cited by the students was the opportunity to participate in school sponsored extracurricular activities.[8] Limited opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities appeared to be caused by the mobility of the migrant lifestyle and by a lack of awareness of the part of school personnel of the importance of reaching out to and including migrant students in the selection of students for athletic teams, service clubs, and school societies at the beginning of the school year. Migratory students are oftentimes selected-out on the basis that they probably will not be present long enough to complete an athletic season or to appear in a final event or performance.

Regular attendance was another school factor recognized as a problem for migrant students. Attendance problems are caused not only by the high mobility of the family's lifestyle, but also by a perceived need for students to work to contribute to the family income.[9] Working students frequently remain invisible to local school attendance personnel. Local authorities aware of working students sometimes fail to enforce district attendance policies in

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[8]Interstate Migrant Secondary Services Program, "Junior High Migrant Student Services: A Compendium" (Oneonta, New York: 1985), p. 10.

[9]Ibid., p. 9.

the same manner for migrant students as they do for other children in the community. The problems associated with attendance are compounded at the high school level where, if the formal procedure occurs at all, local school boards unquestioningly process the voluntary withdrawal from school of migrant students. While the need for labor does not appear to be so great as to cause local youth to be kept out of school, migrant high school students who drop out of school do so with the consent of their parents to work for Wisconsin's agricultural employers. Parents of migrant students, often school dropouts themselves, may not recognize the impact that mobility, frequent school absenses, and dropping out of school will have on their children.

When problems associated with attendance have been overcome, coordinating junior high and high school class schedules between Wisconsin's school districts and homebase schools remains as a significant school problem for migrant students. Junior high and high school class offerings vary from school district to school district within Wisconsin and promotion and graduation requirements differ from district to district and state to state; when class schedules can be perfectly matched to the homebase, there is disparity in the course content; textbooks seldom, if ever, correspond within the same courses. Once the appropriate courses are scheduled and classes are completed, the problems associated with the transfer and acceptance of academic records between schools continue to exist as school factors which contribute to dropping out

school before graduation.

It is not surprising that migrant junior high school students taking part in the study identified language as both a home and a school factor contributing to their educational problems. Greater than eighty-five percent of Wisconsin's migrant students are of Mexican-American descent and live in homes where Spanish is spoken.[10] An obvious barrier to staying in school for Wisconsin's migrant students is the contrast of the two cultures in which the students live. Year after year, seasonal farmworkers are employed in rural Wisconsin communities in which other Spanish speaking families seldom reside.[11] Bilingual Spanish and English speaking professional and non-professional residents have tended to locate in or near Wisconsin's larger cities where their skills are in demand and where adequate professional opportunities exist. Academic progress is made more difficult for students of limited English proficiency when the Spanish speaking skills of local school personnel in the rural schools the students must attend are limited or non-existent. Students are frequently placed in grades based upon their reading ability in English, which to them is a second language, and experience the embarrassment of being older than their classmates.

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[10]Michael Richards and Doris P. Slesinger, The Migrant Farm Worker Population in Wisconsin, 1981 (Madison, Wisconsin: 1984), p.3.

[11]Educational Statistics Center, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "1984-85 Minority Enrollments in Wisconsin Public School Districts", (Madison, Wisconsin: 1985).

Parent involvement, a proven contributor to school success, was one of the home influenced problems for migrant students. Migrant parents are in Wisconsin to earn as much as possible for their families before they move on to their next jobs. As strangers in Wisconsin communities they experience cultural contrasts and find difficulty in becoming involved in the education of their children. Some of the difficulties can be attributed to the parents' own limited school experiences and limited English language proficiency; much of the problem should be recognized as the impossibility of their learning the inner workings of every school district in which they reside while moving from one community to the next in the migrant stream. Another home factor influencing school performance is the house itself. Living quarters, frequently provided by the employer, are not expected to be large enough to provide adequate space for every student in the family to do homework. Oftentimes there is no privacy available for the student at all, nor might there be time in which to do school work if there were an appropriate space.

Children of migratory agricultural workers are commonly given responsibility for the care of younger children in the family at an early age. Few children in the migrant stream experience formal early childhood instruction and many youngsters do not start school at all until they reach an age and situation in which attendance is compulsory. Early roles of responsibility at home and work contribute to the appearance of maturity exhibited by many migrant

junior high and high school students who often have had more exposure to adult associations than their non-migrant classmates as a result of work and travel. Despite appearances, low income and constant mobility can lead to feelings of insecurity in students. Contributing to feelings of insecurity is the reality that migrant students must leave their old friends and make new ones wherever they travel.

Teenage pregnancy and early marriage were two more of the personal and home factors cited by students in the IMSSP study as reasons for dropping out of school.[12] When parents cannot be as actively involved in the education of their children as they would like to be, the need of their children for vocational guidance and academic counseling is increased. Unfortunately, opportunities for school counseling are usually limited for migrant students, and the limited time available with school counselors must be used to coordinate class schedules with homebase schools, rather than to explore personal goals and career plans.

The unavoidable interruptions to educational continuity and the previously cited barriers to successful completion of high school were sufficient to prevent three out of four migrant

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[12] Interstate Migrant Secondary Services Program, "Junior High Migrant Student Services: A Compendium" (Oneconta, New York: 1985), p. 8.

students from receiving high school diplomas.[13] To those obstacles are added recent national efforts at school reform. In response to the cry of a nation at risk, thirty-five states, including Wisconsin, enacted laws which increased requirements for high school graduation.[14] The accumulation of the required number of credits for graduation was already outside the reach of three out of four students who were part of the migrant stream; now migrant students face a more difficult task than ever before. In the past, conflicting cultural and economic messages have made if difficult for migrant students to remain in school until graduation and to forego immediately available wages for the promise of greater financial gain after high school graduation. That graduation appears now to be even further out of reach for migrant children.

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[13] Exotech Systems, Inc. Evaluation of the Impact of ESEA Title I Programs for Migrant Children of Migrant Agricultural Workers, Vol. 1, (Falls Church, Virginia: 1974).

[14] Wisconsin Statutes Relating to Elementary and Secondary Schools, Section 118,33(1)(a).

SUMMARY

As a result of the need for a skilled and temporary farm labor force when local labor is insufficient to meet the need, Wisconsin continues to attract thousands of migratory workers every year. The junior and senior high school age children of those workers, oftentimes contracted seasonal employees themselves, are educationally disadvantaged to varying degrees; many are or will become school dropouts. The educational problems of migrant students are both school and home related. Teenage migrant students experience having to choose between working to contribute to the family income and going to school. They face enrolling in Wisconsin schools where their home language is neither understood nor spoken, and where the curriculum does not correspond to that of their home school. It is common for migrant students to be placed in grades based upon their reading ability in English, which to them is a second language, and to experience the embarrassment of being older than their classmates. For these young people there is little or no participation in extracurricular activities or social events. The economic stresses of poverty and the social stresses of early marriage frequently add to their unique problems. It is appropriate to conclude that the children of migratory agricultural workers are educationally disadvantaged and that until technological or other changes in farm production eliminate the need for seasonal

workers, Wisconsin schools will continue to serve hundreds of junior and senior high school age children of migratory workers every year.

This paper was presented in the Special Needs Section workshop at the State Superintendent's Annual Conference for Supervisors and Directors of Instruction in Madison, Wisconsin, 1985.

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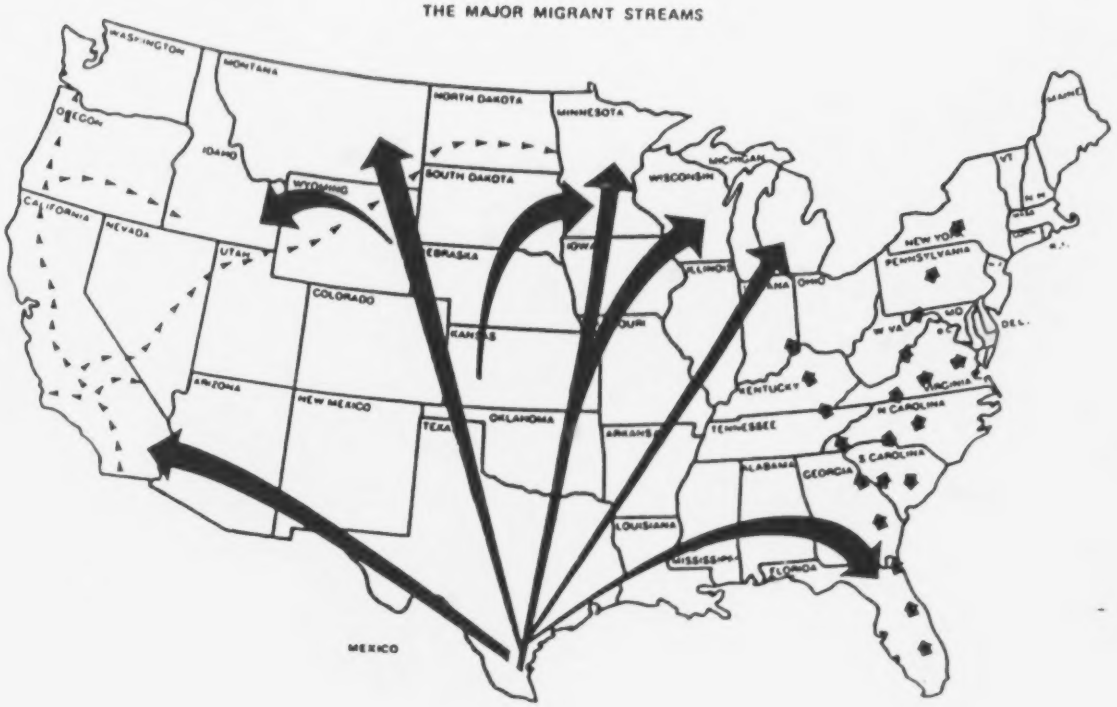
THE MAJOR MIGRANT STREAMS



Migration occurs primarily in three distinct streams that originate in California, Texas, and Florida.

The western stream flows from California to Washington, Oregon, and the Rocky Mountain States.

The midwestern or central stream begins in Mexico and Texas and extends northward into Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

The eastern stream goes from Florida northward along the eastern seaboard.

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